

# Write a Personal History

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Online at: [https://familysearch.org/wiki/en/Write a Personal History](https://familysearch.org/wiki/en/Write_a_Personal_History)

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## Introduction

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If you are really overwhelmed at where to start go to [ldsjournal.com](http://ldsjournal.com).. sign up it's free. There is a section i believe it's called "All about Me" it is a great way to start and it not only asks you the questions to trigger memories you can type your answers right there. Also, the questions are in categories so everything is orderly. It works great.

A personal history is one way to leave a legacy that descendants will treasure for generations. As you create your personal history, you should make sure the information is accurate. If you leave someone else to rely on memories and secondhand stories to create your history, it may not reflect your life accurately. Resources and information in this lesson include:

## Why Create a Personal History?

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Ask yourself these questions—if your parents, grandparents, and other ancestors didn't leave life histories, do you wish they had? Do you wish you could read about their lives? If you answer "yes," then don't leave your descendants to wish the same thing! A record of your life can be a great gift. Words in print can be read and reread, pondered over, and returned to. The words your teenager rejects now may become clear and precious when he or she rereads them later in life.

You could have a great effect on those who follow you. Your example, your trials, and your triumphs will strengthen and motivate others. The prophet Job of the Old Testament, who suffered many trials, mourned, "oh that my word were now written! Oh that they were printed in a book! That they were graven with an iron pen and lead in the rock for ever!" (Job 19:23–24). His words were written, and his triumph over tragedy and his faith have remained an example of devotion to people of the world for thousands of years.

Writing your history now can also provide you with an opportunity to evaluate your life. It may help you clarify your direction in life. Even if your childhood wasn't idyllic, writing about it can help you cope with your feelings and possibly find understanding and forgiveness. See also [2: Writing a Family History](#) in the FamilySearch Learning Center. Many of the same reasons apply.

## When Should I Create My Personal History?

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Start writing your personal history now. Do not put off writing until you have more time or until you retire. You rarely have time to do all you want or need to do, and you never know how long you will live, so don't procrastinate. No one else can write your personal history the way you can. The longer you wait to write it, the more details you will be likely to forget. This story is about your life, and it should be written by you. 2 When writing your history, set realistic and specific goals. For example, you could set a goal to complete a first draft in three months. A final draft could be ready for review in six months. In nine months, you could have a finished copy ready for photocopying and distribution to family members. Or it may be more realistic for you to write one chapter a week for the next 12 months or to write about one subject each week or to write one page a day. You can also write about different eras of life; preschool years, grade school years, high school, etc. Broken up into segments like these makes the task easier to do. Do what you can, but do it regularly and consistently.

## Different Types of Personal Histories

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You can preserve your life history and memories in many ways. The following are a few ideas: A Written History For those who enjoy writing, a written biography is a great way to record your history.

**A written biography could include the following:**

- [\[cyndislist.com/writing.htm\]](http://cyndislist.com/writing.htm) Your personal account of events in your life].
- Photographs of events, friends, family members, homes you grew up in, places you've traveled, and other experiences of interest in your life.

- Copies of family records, such as your birth and marriage certificates, school records, diplomas, religious certificates, awards, and other records of interest.

## **Journals**

Journals are an excellent way of preserving history. Where a personal history tends to be broader in scope and generally covers a greater period of time, a journal can preserve the day-to-day or week-to-week events of your life. It provides a more intimate and detailed account of your daily experiences. Even though journal writing often covers many years of one's life, it is easier for some people to accomplish because it consists of a small amount of time each day or week or rather than a large amount of time all at once. A journal will often cover more than just day-to-day activities in your life. It often contains insights, expressions of emotion, observations about events of the day and how they affect you and your family, musings, and so on. Many people also include drawings or photographs of people, places, and events in their journal, which can add an interesting dimension.

## **Record of Milestones**

Creating a record of milestones is like writing in a journal, except it tends to be less frequent. It's a record of important events such as birthdays, weddings, anniversaries, deaths, life-changing experiences, and major accomplishments and includes a person's feelings regarding the milestones. Some people use scrapbooks to chronicle their important milestones.

## **Electronic Recordings**

With the development of electronic devices, such as video equipment and tape recorders, recording history is easier than ever. Using electronic equipment to record your history, you can include much more than is typically found in a written history. An electronic record of your history could include the sound of your voice, the singing of songs, the playing of a musical instrument, or visual images.

If you use electronic equipment to record your history, understand that the medium you are using will deteriorate or become outdated. Tapes should be played once a year to prevent the sound from bleeding through the tape.

Computer discs, hardware, and software programs can become outdated with time. After a few years, you may have difficulty finding a computer or computer program that will read what you have recorded. You should review the medium you used on a regular basis. (Once a year is best.) Before it gets hard to find equipment to play or read what you have recorded, you should transfer your history onto an updated medium.

## **Oral Histories**

Oral histories are an excellent way to record a personal history. An oral history preserves the voice of a person. It is a great alternative for those who don't feel they have the skills or the desire to write. Those who struggle with writing might find it easy to sit down and talk about their lives. Some people love to talk and find that an oral history is an easy way to preserve personal history. For many people, having someone record stories from their life is a fun and deeply touching experience.

**Expert Tip:** If you plan to record your personal history electronically, be aware that electronic media does not retain quality for very long. Electronic recordings should be transcribed onto archival quality paper. If you digitize it, then it will last forever.

## **Online Photo Books**

With the availability of Internet, it is now possible to create a fine quality [history in book format online](#) and have it delivered to your door step. You can add as many photographs and as much text

as you want. The company then prints out as many books as you want and sends them to you. You can then distribute the finished product to friends and family members.

## Scrapbooking

Scrapbooking has become a popular form of preserving memories and can be a great alternative or addition to a written personal history. It focuses on documenting special events through the use of photographs and other memorabilia. Scrapbooks tend not to be as comprehensive as a written personal history, but they provide an excellent visual history. Scrapbook supplies and classes on scrapbooking are often readily available.

### Brief personal narratives, life highlights, or memoirs

**Expert Tip:** Keeping a journal and a scrapbook together can help you create an excellent history of your life. Narratives and journal entries help provide greater historical and interpretive context to each photograph in your scrapbook.

Narratives are another form of personal history. These narratives document memorable events. The narratives are usually brief and often take only a few minutes to write. Many people find it helpful to set aside a set time each week to write a narrative. For example, one woman spends an hour writing each Sunday afternoon while her young children take a nap. During each session she writes two or three short narratives. These narratives can later be polished and compiled into a longer history.

Appendix A of this lesson gives a list of subjects for personal narratives. You do not need to limit yourself to these topics. They may remind you of other events that you might want to write about as well.

## Before You Begin Writing

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After considering the options listed above, decide what type of history to start with. Whether you are going to write, video tape, make a photo book or scrapbook of your personal history, you should consider the following:

- Gather everything you can find about your life that might help you remember events.
- Organize the items according to the type of history you plan to create.
- Consider carrying note cards with you, and record memories as they come to mind. As you try to remember events of your life, they will begin coming back with amazing accuracy. Often these memories will come at inconvenient times. Note cards provide an easy way to record these memories regardless of when they come.
- As you have time, elaborate on some of your memories. Add more details than what you may have written on your note cards.
- Talk into a tape or video recorder to record some preliminary ideas. You may want to transcribe the recording later or use it as a starting point for your writing.
- Ask relatives and friends to share memories and stories they remember about you. These recollections are extremely valuable; relatives and friends often remember events that happened when you were too young to remember. Or they may remember things that might not have seemed important to you at the time they occurred.

## Potential Subjects for Your History

Listed below are general topics you might consider as you prepare to write. Appendix A provides an additional list of questions to prompt your memory.

- A list of life events in the order they occurred (a chronology)
- A list of the 10 most important things in your life now and details about them
- A health chronology if there are health issues that might affect your descendants
- Family traditions
- Romance
- Personal convictions and learning experiences
- Childhood memories
- Family members—ancestors and descendants
- Funny or embarrassing experiences
- Society, geography, and entertainment around you (anything that gives a context for your life)
- Examples of your talents (poems, artwork, songs)
- Challenges and how they shaped you
- Stories of your life experiences
- Stories or comments about you contributed by others
- Advice you wish to share with future generations. These words may be the most precious words you leave to your loved ones.

**Expert Tip:** If you plan to create something to be printed and published formally, check with a few publishers. They will be able to tell you what you need to know to prepare your materials for publication. This information could prevent extra effort retyping or reformatting your work later.

### Start Writing

As you begin writing, do not be too critical of your writing skills. Get the information, stories, feelings, and events recorded first. Later you can polish what you have written. These suggestions may help you begin your

personal history:

- Begin your narrative at an exciting point in your life. You do not have to begin by listing your date of birth. Get your readers interested, and then they will also enjoy learning the facts.
- Do not worry about style, grammar, and punctuation at this point. Write however feels most comfortable for you.
- Include information about the location of the story or the local history at the time. Describe clothing, the appearance of the room where the story took place, and so on. Try to include the emotions of the participants. Give enough detail to make things interesting (see the example in the Teacher Suggestions at the end of this lesson). Do not let your writing become a list of dates and places without stories and background to bring them to life.

- Be willing to laugh at yourself. Let your personality and humor come through.
- Do not be afraid to write about your weaknesses as well as your strengths. If you feel comfortable writing about mistakes you have made, include what you learned from them and what consequences you suffered. Always be truthful and honest about your life. If something is too uncomfortable to share, just exclude it and move on.
- Be careful about extremely sensitive issues, especially if other people were involved. You want to be very careful not to libel or embarrass others.
- Remember your story doesn't have to be told in chronological order. Digress whenever you feel like it. These digressions might just be the most interesting parts of your story!

### **Other Things to Include**

In addition to writing about your memories, you may want to include some of the following items of interest. They can be part of the body of the history or can be added as an appendix.

- Photographs of family, friends, homes, wedding day, yourself at milestone ages, a few vacation highlights, homes you have lived in, schools you attended, and so on
- Your feelings about social, religious, or personal issues
- Lessons you have learned
- Feelings about loved ones
- Dreams for the future
- Excerpts from journals
- Poems you have written
- Newspaper articles about you or events you took part in
- Copies of certificates
- Maps
- Direction from insightful inspirations

### **Writing Challenges**

If your writing isn't going well, ask yourself why. Maybe you are writing about a subject that you feel needs to be included but that doesn't really excite you. Ask yourself if it is really important and consider skipping it, at least for now. If you feel it is important, then include it. But realize that hard work is often necessary before inspiration comes. Self-discipline when you don't feel like writing may be the answer, but perhaps taking a few days off might help too. An afternoon selecting photographs for your history or visiting a place you talk about in your history might give you a good break from writing. (Consider taking a tape recorder with you and speaking into it as you look over the photographs or visit places important to your history.) Activities related to your history might just be enough to get you remotivated.

Sometimes the hardest time in writing is starting. If you can do nothing else, just write one word. Then expand it into a sentence. Add another sentence. Make a paragraph. Once you get started, the writing often becomes easier and more enjoyable. When you need to take a break from your writing,

stop in the middle of an interesting story or paragraph. Then, when you come back, it will be easier for you to start again where you left off.

Another way to get started when you are stuck is to start at the easiest part of the story you want to tell or to begin with a subject you want to write about. If you find that you just cannot continue writing, consider recording your thoughts and memories into a tape recorder. You or someone else can transcribe the recording. Then you can add additional details.

**Expert Tip:** If you are using a computer to type your personal history, remember to save your work often. It would be very frustrating to lose all your hard work because of a computer failure.

## Review and Evaluate What You Have Written

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Writing a first draft is only the beginning of the process. Some of your best writing will happen as you review what you have written and revise and rewrite sentences that don't work as well as you would like them to. A trusted friend, your spouse, or another family member can help with this process. Ask yourself and other reviewers the following questions:

- Does the reader feel involved and care about the outcome of the stories?
- Do the stories flow well? If not, how can they be improved?
- Is the identity of the people in the stories clear? For example, if you speak about Grandma, have you explained which grandma? Do you explain which aunt you mean when you say, "My aunt gave me my favorite Christmas gift that year"?
- Does anything need to be clarified?
- Are the sentences too long or complicated?
- Is there too much detail?
- Are there any spelling errors?
- How is the grammar? Often grammar mistakes become obvious if the material is read aloud.
- Are the same words or expressions used too often? Do too many sentences begin with "I remember"?
- Is it clear and organized?
- Do the stories need to be shortened or do more details need to be added to make the stories more enjoyable?
- Are the characters explained and described so the reader knows them?
- Are names, dates, and places accurate?
- Is the proper tense used throughout the history?

### After the Review

You must decide what input to incorporate. Decide which feedback is useful and which is not. Sometimes a reviewer will express a concern that will indicate a problem besides the one mentioned. For example, a reviewer might say that a certain story is too long. But perhaps length is not the real problem; you may need to consider instead how you tell the story or how you describe important events.

**Expert Tips:**

**Record your story on tape.** Consider reading your story on to tape, and then listen to the recording. Do you feel it is honest and worth listening to? Does it represent your life accurately?

**Be careful about using information about living people.** Be extremely sensitive to personal information, such as dates, sensitive issues, and contentious stories, of individuals who are still alive or who have living family members who may read your history. Never publish anything that you would not want to appear in tomorrow's newspaper. Also, be extremely cautious about including addresses and phone numbers of living people.

## Decide How You Want Your Finished History to Look

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Now is the time to decide where to insert photographs, letters, copies of letters, and so on. It is also a good time to review and correct the appearance of your work. Consider line spacing, headings of chapters, and subheadings.

Decide how you want your history to look when you are finished. You may decide to add or delete some of the design and layout elements listed below as your work progresses:

- Title page
- Preface (where you share thoughts and feelings about your project)
- Table of contents
- List of photographs and illustrations
- Chronology (a quick and concise overview of your life in a page or two)
- Narrative
- Appendixes (family group sheets, pedigree charts, will extracts, handwriting samples, favorite recipes, and so on)
- Maps
- Index
- Cover page

## Resources

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**Web sites** to help you write your personal history

- See the tutorial at the FamilySearch Learning Center, "[Ancestors Season 1: Leaving a Legacy](#)".

**Books**

- *From Shoe Boxes to Books: Writing Great Personal Histories* by Amy Jo Oaks Long. Ten-step program to create a personal history.
- *From Memories to Manuscript—The Five Step Method of Writing Your Life Story* by Joan R. Neubauer

**Expert Tips:**

**Be generous with photographs.** Most people look at photographs before reading text. Photographs will create interest in reading the accompanying text. Place photographs where they will be relevant to the writing on the page.

**Consider the layout of your history**, such as which type size, spacing, and font makes the text easy to read. If you are planning to print on both sides of the page, be sure to leave margins on the binding side of each page wide enough to allow for binding, usually at least a quarter inch wider than the normal edge of a typewritten page.

## Appendix

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For suggested questions to prompt personal recollections, and for tips on preserving family photos and artifacts, go to the [Appendix](#).

## Websites

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- [cyndislist.com/writing.htm](http://cyndislist.com/writing.htm) (Links to various sites with helps for writing personal histories.)
- [Gen Writers.com](http://GenWriters.com) (Helps for writing personal histories.)
- [Writing the Journey.com](http://WritingtheJourney.com) (Techniques for writing personal history with focus on style.)
- [Ohana Software.com](http://OhanaSoftware.com) (Tutorial for writing your personal history.)
- [Personal History Help.com](http://PersonalHistoryHelp.com) (10-step program to writing a personal history.)